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Blunt's secret visit to Philby in Beirut

by Barrie Penrose and Simon Freeman

ANTHONY BLUNT—the former art adviser to the Queen, who was stripped of his knighthood when he was exposed as a Soviet spy two years ago—has admitted to The Sunday Times that he paid a secret visit to his fellow-agent Kim Philby in Beirut in 1961, before Philby finally defected to Moscow. He went under the cover of a British Council-sponsored trip, which apparently escaped the attention of the secret services.

There is also evidence that Blunt had a second rendezvous with Philby just before Philby finally defected to Moscow. We have learned that the two met some time during the crucial period when Philby was finally making up his mind. Blunt has denied that he met Philby in Beirut, though he has not denied that a meeting did take place. It is possible that the rendezvous was outside Lebanon, in January 1963, during a brief period when Philby left Beirut.

These latest revelations about the extent of Blunt's activities come in the midst of a welter of new detail about the extent of Britain's postwar spy scandal.

Last week The Sunday Times exposed the spying activities of Leo Long, another member of the circle of Cambridge students converted to the Soviet cause in the 1930s. Today, on page three, we reveal that a fellow-undergraduate of those days, whom MI5 believed had been a spy with Blunt, now says he was forced into talking by the bullying tactics of the intelligence officers who interviewed him.

The 1961 meeting in Beirut between Blunt and Philby took place just after the arrest of another Soviet agent, George Blake, who was sentenced to 42 years' imprisonment at the Old Bailey in the summer of that year, and its timing is critical for two reasons:

- It raises the strong possibility that Blunt went to Beirut to persuade Philby to defect to Moscow like his predecessors, Burgess and Maclean—a decision Philby in fact postponed for another 18 months.

- It appears to contradict Blunt's claim that he had abandoned his espionage connections by 1951. Until today MI5 and MI6 officers have apparently not been aware of Blunt's clandestine rendezvous in Beirut.

Yesterday Blunt, in a statement prepared by his solicitor Michael Rubinstein, claimed that he had not exerted "pressure" on Philby. But it is hard to accept that. The trip to Beirut came at exactly the time when the KGB were also pressing Philby to "come home" to Moscow. The Blake arrest meant that their British network, which had included Philby and Blunt, was vulnerable, since Blake was said to be confessing a great deal to his MI5 interrogators. It was vital that Philby should not face interrogation by British intelligence in London if both their skins were to be saved.

Blunt had learned, too, that Philby was drinking so excessively that he could no longer be relied on to keep quiet at a time when British intelligence was closing in on the Cambridge spy ring.

Blunt also confirmed yesterday that during his stay in Beirut he stayed with Sir Ponsonby Moore Crosthwaite, then British ambassador to Lebanon. Crosthwaite, now 74, who had been a close friend of Blunt's since the late twenties, recalls the trip well.

"Anthony came out with his companion, John Gaskell and stayed at the ambassador's residence for about a fortnight," he told The Sunday Times yesterday. "I knew Philby, of course, but Anthony, of whom I was a long-standing friend and admirer, never told me he was seeing Philby in Beirut. I knew there was a question mark in Whitehall about Philby. If he really went to warn Philby then I've lost confidence in any of his statements. Blunt rather made use of me."

Crosthwaite said that he had been aware of Blunt's Marxist convictions, but he had never suspected his close friend might be working for the Russians. Asked whether Blunt might have spied while visiting him at British embassies abroad on previous occasions, Crosthwaite replied:

"Absolutely impossible. I've taken papers home, but it would have been impossible. It's unthinkable that Anthony would ask me about state affairs. You may think me an awful innocent fool, but even I would have been surprised if Anthony had asked me whether we'd broken Russian cyphers or anything secret at the embassy."

Crosthwaite said he had twice been questioned about his knowledge of Blunt and other contemporaries who may also have worked for the KGB. "I was first visited in the mid-sixties when I was ambassador to Sweden," said Crosthwaite. "Then, after my retirement, the Foreign Office asked me to see a man from the security services. That man told me they were still searching for the original source of evil—the original seducer. I had to say most strongly 'no.' I was quite innocent of any knowledge."

Crosthwaite never raised the issue with Blunt. "My instinct told me that this was a private matter," he said, "and it was better not to raise it with Anthony. I didn't want to bother him about it. Until two years ago I was absolutely a devoted admirer of Anthony Blunt. Now I think it would have been better if he had died."

Philby stayed on in Beirut until January 1963, when an MI6 officer, Nicholas Elliott, was sent to Beirut by Sir Dick White, then MI6's director general. On January 10 Elliott questioned Philby at a flat which MI6 had rented for him in Beirut.

Eventually Philby admitted he had spied for the Russians, but he refused to make a written statement or fly straight back to London with the MI6 man. Philby said he "wanted time to think things over". Elliott tempted him with the possibility of immunity. Philby insisted on more time to think and Elliott returned to Britain. On January 23 Philby sailed from Beirut for Russia.

Blunt's trip, therefore, did have a measure of success. Philby does appear to have him convinced that he should not return to London to face further interrogation. If he had done so, Blunt's name would almost certainly have rolled out.